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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE; NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/WATERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/27/2017

TAGS: KWBG PBTS IS KISL KIRF

SUBJECT: NEW MUGHRABI GATE RAMP ROUTE STILL UNDEFINED

REF: A. TEL AVIV 2236

¶B. PARIS 2484

¶C. JERUSALEM 575

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary. Ir Amim founder Danny Seidemann told ConGen and Embassy PolOffs July 23-24 that Mughrabi Gate ramp plans are far from settled, contrary to Israel press reports claiming a new design has been adopted. Seidemann commented that PM Olmert is under pressure from religious-nationalist groups to approve a new ramp in spite of Israel's commitment to allow public scrutiny in the decision-making process. Seidemann warned that a change in the ramp route could spark more conflict in Jerusalem's Old City, and raised questions about the legality of excavations near the ramp. End summary.

SEIDEMANN: MUGHRABI RAMP ROUTE UNDECIDED

¶12. (C) Ir Amim founder Danny Seidemann told ConGen and Embassy PolOffs on July 23-24 that the route/design of the new ramp leading to Mughrabi Gate is not finalized, despite an article in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz stating that a Jerusalem panel had approved new ramp plans. Seidemann said discussion of the ramp's route is ongoing and various plans have been floated. He said presently there is no process of public comment or review or coordination with Islamic Waqf officials to ensure that Muslim concerns about the new ramp are addressed. He said most plans under consideration depict a ramp significantly longer than the existing earthen ramp.

RAMP ROUTE ULTIMATELY OLMERT'S DECISION

¶13. (C) Seidemann said the final decision on the ramp's route is up to Israeli PM Olmert. He commented that Olmert is under pressure from Jerusalem Mayor Uri Lupolianski, Western Wall Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, and religious-nationalist elements to skip public review and approve ramp blueprints by the end of July. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs is opposed to this approach, Seidemann said, because it could violate Israel's commitment to UNESCO to work with Jordanian and Waqf officials on the ramp's route. Seidemann said he hopes Jordan will contribute to final ramp plans.

RAMP ROUTE POTENTIAL FLASHPOINT IN CONFLICT

¶14. (C) Noting the Mughrabi Gate ramp's potential as a flashpoint between Jews and Muslims, Seidemann said a new ramp should follow the pre-2004 route as closely as possible to avoid conflict. (Note: Ramp plans published in Israeli and Palestinian press show a ramp much larger than the existing temporary one. End note). He said he has heard plans to elevate the ramp and use the area underneath it to

expand the Western Wall plaza, and said any change to the status quo could ignite Muslim/Jewish tensions. Seidemann said conflicting press reports in the past two weeks concerning the ramp area resulted from an information campaign by right wing Israeli groups to stir up controversy on the issue.

¶5. (C) Seidemann also questioned the legality of the archaeological excavations at the ramp site, saying that Israeli law requires approval of construction plans before a salvage dig can occur. The new Mughrabi Gate ramp plans have not been approved, he said, so the excavations should not be underway.

EXCAVATIONS CEASE PENDING
FINAL RAMP DECISION

¶6. (C) ConGen PolOff visited the Mughrabi Gate area on July 23 and observed that excavations had ceased, consistent with press reports that all work is on hold pending a final decision on the ramp's route.

¶7. (C) Post will continue to work with Embassy Tel Aviv to reconcile different versions of what is happening on this issue (reftel).

WALLES